

Long Live The King

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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Then she stopped, for the prince had brought his heels together sharply, and bending over her hand, had kissed it, exactly as he kissed his Aunt Annuncata's when he went to have tea with her. Mrs. Thorpe was fairly startled, not at the kiss, but at the grace with which the tribute was rendered.

Then she looked down, and it restored her composure to find that Ferdinand William Otto, too, had turned eyes toward the cake. He was, after all, only a hungry small boy. With quick tenderness she stooped and kissed him gravely on the forehead.

Careless were strange to Ferdinand William Otto. His warm little heart leaped and pounded. At that moment, he would have died for her!

Mr. Thorpe came home a little late. He kissed Bobby twelve times, and one to grow on. He shook hands absently with the visitor, and gave the Fraulein the evening paper—an extravagance on which he insisted, although one could read the news for nothing by going to the cafe on the corner. Then he drew his wife aside.

"Look here!" he said. "Don't tell Bobby—it's not exciting him, and of course it's not our funeral, anyhow—but there's a report that the crown prince has been kidnapped. And that's not all. The old king is dying!"

"How terrible!"

"Worse than that. The old king gone and no crown prince! It may mean almost any sort of trouble! I've closed up at the park for the night." His arm around his wife, he looked through the doorway to where Bobby and Ferdinand were counting the candles. "It's made me think pretty hard," he said. "Bobby mustn't go around alone the way he's been doing. All Americans here are considered millionaires. If the crown prince could go, think how easy—"

His arm tightened around his wife, and together they went into the birthday feast. Ferdinand William Otto was hungry. He ate eagerly—chicken, fruit compote, potato salad—again shades of the court physicians, who fed him at night a balanced ration of milk, egg, and zwieback! Bobby also ate busily, and conversation languished.

Then the moment came when, the first cravings appeased, they sat back in their chairs while Pepy cleared the table and brought in a knife to cut the cake. Mr. Thorpe had excused himself for a moment. Now he came back, with a bottle wrapped in a newspaper, and sat down again.

"I thought," he said, "as this is a real occasion, not exactly Robert's coming of age, but marking his arrival at years of discretion, the period when he ceases to be a small boy and becomes a big one, we might drink a toast to it."

"Robert!" objected the big boy's mother.

"A teaspoonful each, honey," he begged. "It changes it from a mere supper to a festivity."

He poured a few drops of wine into the children's glasses, and filled them up with water. Then he filled the others, and sat smiling, this big young man, who had brought his loved ones across the sea, and was trying to make them happy up a flight of stone stairs, above a concierge's bureau that smelled of garlic.

"First," he said, "I believe it is customary to toast the king. Friends, I give you the good king and brave soldier, Ferdinand of Livonia."

They stood up to drink it, and even Pepy had a glass.

Ferdinand William Otto was on his feet first. He held his glass up in his right hand, and his eyes shone. He knew what to do. He had seen the king's health drunk any number of times.

"To his majesty, Ferdinand of Livonia," he said solemnly. "God keep the king!"

Over their glasses Mrs. Thorpe's eyes met her husband's. How they trained their children here!

But Ferdinand William Otto had not finished. "I give you," he said, in his clear young treble, holding his glass, "the president of the United States—the president!"

"The president!" said Mr. Thorpe. They drank again, except the Fraulein, who disapproved of children being made much of, and only pretended to sip her wine.

"Bobby," said his mother, with a catch in her voice, "haven't you something to suggest—as a toast?"

Bobby's eyes were on the cake; he came back with difficulty.

"Well," he meditated, "I guess—would 'home' be all right?"

"Home!" they all said, a little shakily, and drank to it.

Home! To the Thorpes, a little house on a shady street in America; to the Fraulein, a thatched cottage in the mountains of Germany and an old mother; to Pepy, the room in a tenement where she went at night; to Ferdinand William Otto, a formal suite of apartments in the palace, sur-

rounded by pomp, ordered by rule and precedent, hardened by military discipline, and unsoftened by family love, save for the grim affection of the old king.

Home!

After all, Pepy's plan went astray for the Fraulein got the china baby and Ferdinand William Otto the Lincoln penny.

"That," said Bobby's father, "is a Lincoln penny, young man. It bears the portrait of Abraham Lincoln. Have you ever heard of him?"

The prince looked up. Did he not know the "Gettysburg address" by heart?

"Yes, sir," he said. "The—my grandfather thinks that President Lincoln was a very great man."

"One of the world's greatest. I hardly thought, over here—" Mr. Thorpe paused and looked speculatively at the boy. "You'd better keep that penny where you won't lose it," he said soberly. "It doesn't hurt us to try to be good. If you're in trouble, think of the difficulties Abraham Lincoln surmounted. If you want to be great think how great he was." He was a trifle ashamed of his own earnestness. "All that for a penny, young man!"

The festivities were taking a serious turn. There was a little packet at each plate, and now Bobby's mother reached over and opened hers.

"Oh!" she said, and exhibited a gaudy tissue paper bonnet. Everybody had one. Mr. Thorpe's was a dunce's cap, and Fraulein's a giddy Pierrette of black and white. Bobby had a military cap. With eager fingers Ferdinand William Otto opened his; he had never tasted this delicious paper cap joy before.

It was a crown, a sturdy bit of gold paper, cut into points and set with red paste jewels—a gem of a crown. He was charmed. He put it on his head, with the unconsciousness of childhood, and posed delightedly.

The Fraulein looked at Prince Ferdinand William Otto, and slowly the color left her lean face. She stared. It was he, then, and none other. Stupid! Not to have known at the beginning! He, the crown prince, here in the home of these barbarous Americans, when, by every plan that had been made, he should now be in the hands of those who would dispose of him.

"I give you," said Mr. Thorpe, raising his glass toward his wife, "the giver of the feast. Boys, up with you!"

It was then that the Fraulein, making an excuse, slipped out of the room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The King Is Dead.

Now at last the old king's hour had come. Mostly he slept, as though his body, eager for its long rest, had already given up the struggle. Stimulants, given by his devoted physician, had no effect. Other physicians there were, a group of them, but it was Doctor Weidemann who stood by the bed and waited.

Father Gregory, his friend of many years, had come again from Etzel, and it was he who had administered the sacrament. The king had roused for it, and had smiled at the father.

"So!" he said, almost in a whisper, "you would send me clean! It is hard to scour an old kettle."

Doctor Weidemann bent over the bed. "Majesty," he implored, "if there is anything we can do to make you comfortable—"

"Give me Hubert's picture," said the king. When his fingers refused to hold it, Annuncata came forward swiftly and held it before him. But his heavy eyes closed. With more intuition than might have been expected of her, the archduchess laid it on the white coverlet, and placed her father's hand on it.

The two sisters of mercy stood beside the bed, and looked down at the quiet figure.

"I should wish to die so," whispered the elder. "A long life, filled with many deeds, and then to sleep away!"

"A long life, full of many sorrows!" observed the younger one, her eyes full of tears. "He has outlived all that he loved."

"Except the little Otto."

Their glances met, for even here there was a question.

As if their thought had penetrated the haze which is, perhaps, the mist that hides from us the gates of heaven, the old king opened his eyes.

"Otto!" he said. "I—wish—"

Annuncata bent over him. "He is coming, father," she told him, with white lips.

She slipped to her knees beside the bed, and looked up to Doctor Weidemann with appealing eyes.

"I am afraid," she whispered. "Can you not—?"

He shook his head. She had asked a question in her glance, and he had answered. The crown prince was



"A Long Life, Full of Many Sorrows."

gone. Perhaps the search would be successful. Could he not be held, then, until the boy was found? And Doctor Weidemann had answered "No."

In the antechamber the council waited, standing and without speech. But in an armchair beside the door to the king's room the chancellor sat, his face buried in his hands. In spite of precautions, in spite of everything, the blow had fallen. The crown prince, to him at once son and sovereign, the little crown prince, was gone. And his old friend, his comrade of many years, lay at his last hour.

Now he waited for the king's death. Waited numbly. For, with the tolling of St. Stefan's bell would rise the cry for the new king.

And there was no king.

In the little room where the sisters kept their medicines, so useless now, Hedwig knelt at the prie-dieu and prayed.

The king roused again. "Mettilch?" he asked.

The elder sister tiptoed to the door and opened it. The council turned, dread on their faces. She placed a hand on the chancellor's shoulder.

"His majesty has asked for you."

When he looked up, dazed, she bent down and took his hand.

"Courage!" she said quietly.

The chancellor stood a second inside the door. Then he went to the side of the bed, and knelt, his lips to the cold, white hand on the counterpane.

"Sire!" he choked. "It is I—Mettilch."

The king looked at him, and placed his hand on the bowed gray head. Then his eyes turned to Annuncata and rested there. It was as if he saw her, not as the embittered woman of late years, but as the child of the woman he had loved.

"A good friend, and a good daughter," he said clearly. "Few men die so fortunate, and fewer sovereigns." His hand moved from Mettilch's head, and rested on the photograph.

The elder sister leaned forward and touched his wrist. "Doctor!" she said sharply.

Doctor Weidemann came first, the others following. They grouped around the bed. Then the oldest of them, who had brought Annuncata into the world, touched her on the shoulder.

"Madame!" he said. "Madame, I—his majesty has passed away."

Mettilch staggered to his feet, and took a long look at the face of his old sovereign and king.

In the meantime, things had been happening in the room where the council waited. The council free of the restraint of the chancellor's presence, had fallen into low-voiced consultation. What was to be done?

They knew already the rumors of the streets, and were helpless before them. They had done what they could. But the boy was gone, and the city rising.

Already the garrison of the fortress had been ordered to the palace, but it could not arrive before midnight. Friese had questioned the wisdom of it, at that, and was for flight as soon as the king died. Beyer, on the other hand, urged a stand, in the hope that the crown prince would be found.

Their voices, lowered at first, rose acrimoniously; almost they penetrated to the silent room beyond. On to the discussion came Nikky Larisch, covered with dust and spotted with froth from his horse. He entered without ceremony, his boyish face drawn and white, his cap gone, his eyes staring.

"The chancellor?" he said.

Some one pointed to the room beyond.

Nikky hesitated. Then, being young and dramatic, even in tragedy, he unbuckled his sword belt and took it off, placing it on a table.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have come to surrender myself."

The council stared.

"For what reason?" demanded Marschall coldly.

"I believe it is called high treason," he closed his eyes for a moment. "It is because of my negligence that this thing has happened. He was in my charge, and I left him."

No one said anything. The council looked at a loss, rather like a flock of

sheep confronting some strange animal.

"I would have shot myself," said Nikky Larisch, "but it was too easy." Then, rather at a loss as to the exact etiquette of arresting one's self, he bowed slightly and waited.

The door into the king's bedchamber opened. The chancellor came through, his face working. It closed behind him.

"Gentlemen of the council," he said. "It is my duty—my duty—to announce—"

His voice broke; his grizzled chin quivered; tears rolled down his cheeks. "Friends," he said pitifully, "our good king—my old comrade—is dead!"

The birthday supper was over. It had ended with an American ice cream, brought in carefully by Pepy, because of its expensiveness. They had cut the cake with "Boby" on the top, and the crown prince had eaten far more than was good for him.

He sat, flinging the Lincoln penny and feeling extremely full and very contented.

Then, suddenly, from a far off church a deep-toned bell began to toll slowly.

Prince Ferdinand William Otto caught it. St. Stefan's bell! He sat up and listened. The sound was faint; one felt it rather than heard it, but the slow booming was unmistakable. He got up and pushed his chair back.

Other bells had taken it up, and now the whole city seemed alive with bells—bells that swung sadly from side to side, as if they said over and over: "Alas, alas!"

Something like panic seized Ferdinand William Otto. Some calamity had happened. Some one was—perhaps his grandfather?

He turned an appealing face to Mrs. Thorpe. "I must go," he said. "I do not wish to appear rude, but something is wrong. The bells—"

Pepy had been listening, too. Her broad face worked. "They mean one thing," she said slowly. "I have heard it said many times. When St. Stefan's tolls like that, the king is dead!"

"No! No!" cried Ferdinand William Otto and ran madly out of the door.

While the birthday supper was at its height, in the bureau of the concierge sat old Adelbert, heavy and despairing. That very day had he learned to what use the committee would put the information he had given them, and his old heart was dead within him. One may not be loyal for seventy years, and then easily become a traitor.

Then, at seven o'clock, something happened.

The concierge's niece had gone leaving the supper ready cooked or the back of the stove. Old Adelbert sat alone, and watched the red bars of the stove fade to black. By that time it was done, and he was of the damned. The crown prince, who was of an age with the American lad upstairs, the crown prince was in the hands of his enemies. He, old Adelbert, had done it.

And now it was forever too late. Terrible thoughts filled his mind. He could not live thus, yet he could not die. The daughter must have the pension. He must live, a traitor, he on whose breast the king himself had pinned a decoration.

He wore his new uniform, in honor of the day. Suddenly he felt that he could not wear it any longer. He had no right to any uniform. He who had sold his country was of no country.

He went slowly out and up the staircase, dragging his wooden leg painfully from step to step. He heard the concierge come in below, his heavy footsteps re-echoed through the building. Inside the door he called furiously to his niece. Old Adelbert heard him strike a match to light the gas.

In his room he sat down on a straight chair inside the door, and stared ahead. Then, slowly and mechanically, he took off his new uniform and donned the old one. He would have put on civilian clothes, had he possessed any. For by the deeds of that day he had forfeited the right to the king's garb.

It was there that Black Humbert, hurrying up, found him. The concierge was livid, his massive frame shook with excitement.

"Quick!" he said, and swore a great oath. "To the shop of the cobbler Heinz, and tell him this word. Here in the building is the boy."

"What boy?"

The concierge closed a great hand on the veteran's shoulder. "Who but the crown prince himself!" he said.

"But I thought—how can he be here?"

"Here is he, in our very hands. It is no time to ask questions."

"If he is here—"

"He is with the Americans," hissed the concierge, the veins on his forehead swollen with excitement. "Now, go, and quickly. I shall watch. Say that when I have secured the lad, I shall take him there. Let all be ready. An hour ago," he said, raising his great fists on high, "and everything lost. Now—hurry, old wooden leg. It is a great night."

"But I cannot. Already I have done too much. I am damned. I have lost my soul. I also am soon to die."

"You will go."

And, at last, he went, hobbling down the staircase recklessly, because the looming figure at the stairhead was listening. He reached the street. There, only a block away, was the cobbler's shop, lighted, but with the dirty curtains drawn across the window.

(To be continued.)

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